

be found in a tumor sample (e.g., a biopsy). In this embodiment, one might design the probes to precisely the same site, but one to match the wild-type sequence and one to match the mutant. Quantitative detection of the products of cleavage from a reaction performed for a set amount of time will reveal the ratio of the two genes in the mixture. Such analysis may also be performed on unrelated genes in a mixture. This type of analysis is not intended to be limited to two genes. Many variants within a mixture may be similarly measured.

Alternatively, different sites on a single gene may be monitored and quantified to verify the measurement of that gene. In this embodiment, the signal from each probe would be expected to be the same.

It is also contemplated that multiple probes may be used that are not differently labeled, such that the aggregate signal is measured. This may be desirable when using many probes designed to detect a single gene to boost the signal from that gene. This configuration may also be used for detecting unrelated sequences within a mix. For example, in blood banking it is desirable to know if any one of a host of infectious agents is present in a sample of blood. Because the blood is discarded regardless of which agent is present, different signals on the probes would not be required in such an application of the present invention, and may actually be undesirable for reasons of confidentiality.

Just as described for the two-oligonucleotide system, above, the specificity of the detection reaction will be influenced by the aggregate length of the target nucleic acid sequences involved in the hybridization of the complete set of the detection oligonucleotides. For example, there may be applications in which it is desirable to detect a single region within a complex genome. In such a case the set of oligonucleotides may be chosen to require accurate recognition by hybridization of a longer segment of a target nucleic acid, often in the range of 20 to 40 nucleotides. In other instances it may be desirable to have the set of oligonucleotides interact with multiple sites within a target sample. In these cases one approach would be to use a set of oligonucleotides that recognize a smaller, and thus statistically more common, segment of target nucleic acid sequence.

5 In one preferred embodiment, the invader and stacker oligonucleotides may be designed to be maximally stable, so that they will remain bound to the target sequence for extended periods during the reaction. This may be accomplished through any one of a number of measures well known to those skilled in the art, such as adding extra hybridizing sequences to the length of the oligonucleotide (up to about 50 nts in total length), or by using residues with reduced negative charge, such as phosphorothioates or peptide-nucleic acid residues, so that the complementary strands do not repel each other to degree that natural strands do. Such modifications may also serve to make these flanking oligonucleotides resistant to contaminating nucleases, thus further ensuring their continued presence on the target strand during the course of the reaction. In addition, the Invader™ and stacker oligonucleotides may be covalently attached to the target (e.g., through the use of psoralen cross-linking).

10 The use of the reaction temperatures at or near the T_m of the probe oligonucleotide, rather than the use of cleavage, to drive the turnover of the probe oligonucleotide in these detection reactions means that the amount of the probe oligonucleotide cleaved off may be substantially reduced without adversely affecting the turnover rate. It has been determined that the relationship between the 3' end of the upstream oligonucleotide and the desired site of cleavage on the probe must be carefully designed. It is known that the preferred site of cleavage for the types of structure specific endonucleases employed herein is one basepair into a duplex (Lyamichev *et al.*, *supra*). It was previously believed that the presence of an upstream oligonucleotide or primer allowed the cleavage site to be shifted away from this preferred site, into the single stranded region of the 5' arm (Lyamichev *et al.*, *supra* and U.S. Patent No. 5,422,253). In contrast to this previously proposed mechanism, and while not limiting the present invention to any particular mechanism, it is believed that the nucleotide immediately 5', or upstream of the cleavage site on the probe (including miniprobe and mid-range probes) must be able to basepair with the target for efficient cleavage to occur. In the case of the present invention, this would be the nucleotide in the probe sequence immediately upstream of the intended cleavage site. In addition, as described herein, it has been observed that in order to direct cleavage to

that same site in the probe, the upstream oligonucleotide must have its 3' base (*i.e.*, nt) immediately upstream of the the intended cleavage site of the probe. This places the 3' terminal nucleotide of the upstream oligonucleotide and the base of the probe oligonucleotide 5' of the cleavage site in competition for pairing with the corresponding nucleotide of the target strand.

To examine the outcome of this competition, *i.e.* which base is paired during a successful cleavage event, substitutions were made in the probe and invader oligonucleotides such that either the probe or the Invader™ oligonucleotide were mismatched with the target sequence at this position. The effects of both arrangements on the rates of cleavage were examined. When the Invader™ oligonucleotide is unpaired at the 3' end, the rate of cleavage was not reduced. If this base was removed, however, the cleavage site was shifted upstream of the intended site. In contrast, if the probe oligonucleotide was not base-paired to the target just upstream of the site to which the Invader™ oligonucleotide was directing cleavage, the rate of cleavage was dramatically reduced, suggesting that when a competition exists, the probe oligonucleotide was the molecule to be base-paired in this position.

It appears that the 3' end of the upstream invader oligonucleotide is unpaired during cleavage, and yet is required for accurate positioning of the cleavage. To examine which part(s) of the 3' terminal nucleotide are required for the positioning of cleavage, Invader™ oligonucleotides were designed that terminated on this end with nucleotides that were altered in a variety of ways. Sugars examined included 2' deoxyribose with a 3' phosphate group, a dideoxyribose, 3' deoxyribose, 2' O-methyl ribose, arabinose and arabinose with a 3' phosphate. Abasic ribose, with and without 3' phosphate were tested. Synthetic "universal" bases such as 3-nitropyrrole and 5-nitroindole on ribose sugars were tested. Finally, a base-like aromatic ring structure, acridine, linked to the 3' end the previous nucleotide without a sugar group was tested. The results obtained support the conclusion that the aromatic ring of the base (at the 3' end of the invader oligonucleotide) is the required moiety for accomplishing the direction of cleavage to the desired site within the downstream probe.